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The Battle of Belmont

November 7th, 1861.

KANSAS COMMANDERY

OF THE

Military Order of the Loyal Legion
of the United States.

WAR PAPER No. 22.

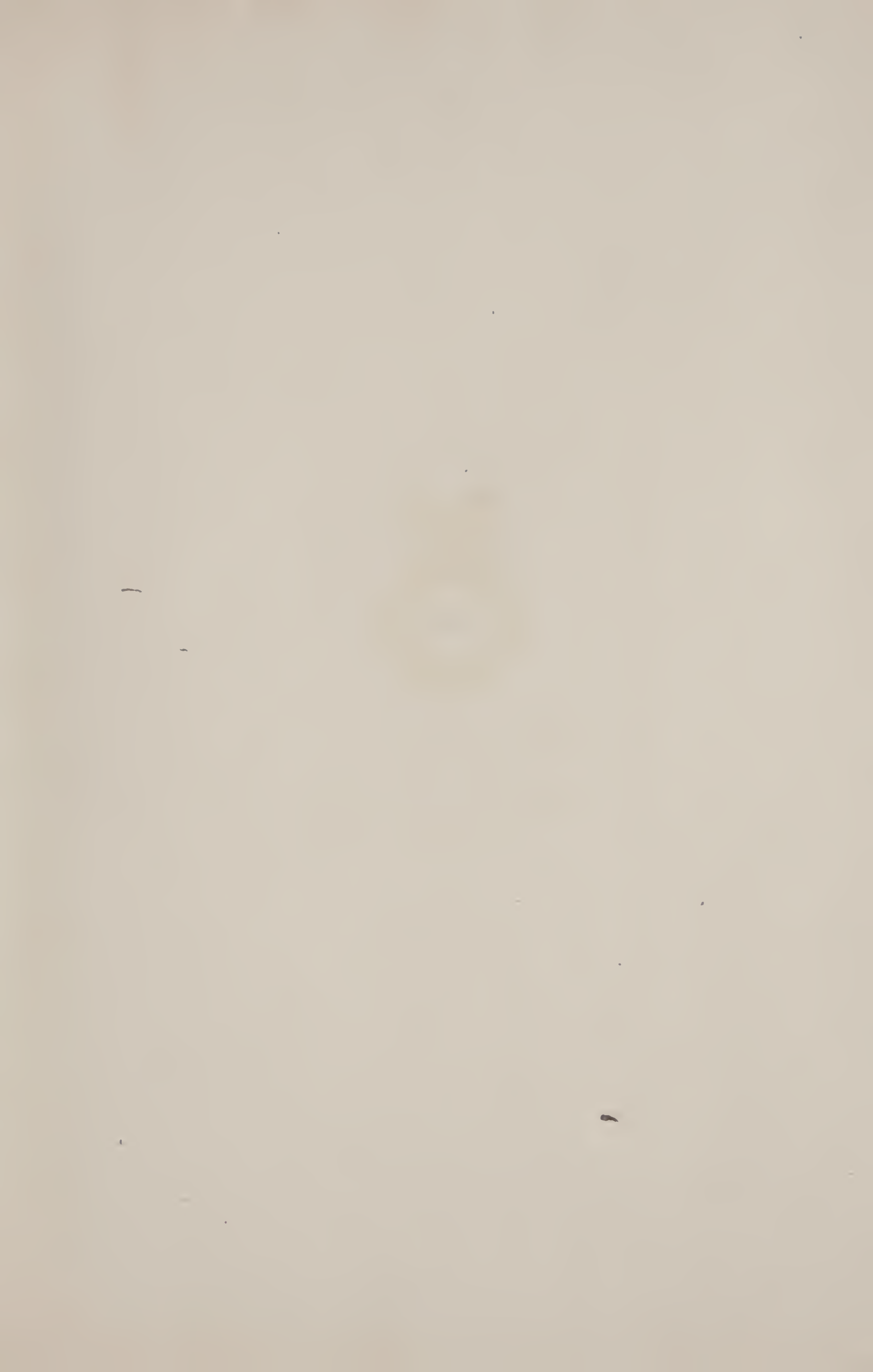




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THE
BATTLE OF BELMONT,

November 7, 1861.

A PAPER

Prepared and Read before the Kansas Commandery
of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion
of the United States.

—BY—

Companion JOHN SEATON.

Captain 22d Illinois Infantry.



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The Battle of Belmont.

Read before Kansas Commandery, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, January 2, 1902, by Companion John Seaton, Captain 22d Illinois Infantry.

On the 6th day of November, 1861, the camps at Cairo, Illinois, Fort Holt, Kentucky, and Bird's Point, Missouri, began to show more of the spirit of military action than had been the custom hitherto. For months the main duty had been to drill, build breastworks, and occasionally venture forth in small bodies of cavalry and infantry to reconnoitre in Missouri and Kentucky towards the Confederacy's front at Columbus, Kentucky: these parties separately marching on each side of the Mississippi River.

It was evident that these excursions were indulged in by the commandants of the camps at Fort Holt and Bird's Point, more for the purpose of familiarizing the soldiers with the sensation of being in "the enemy's country," where danger was supposed to lurk behind every bush. These soldiers were sometimes enlivened by stern alarms of war growing out of the fact that the rebels were engaged in sending out similar excursions; and thus conflicts of small moment would occur, resulting in some one or more of either side being wounded. Then would ensue a lively chase, the party breaking first being hotly pursued by the other for perhaps a mile or two, when discretion would become the better part of valor, and the commanding officer of the squad, calling off the dogs of war, order a return to camp. There, around the camp-fires, the valiant heroes of the occasion would recount the exciting events of the day, sufficiently blood-curdling to the "tenderfoot" soldier boys who had not yet taken part in such divertisement.

Also now and then a gunboat would paddle down the

river to within shooting distance of the advanced posts of the rebel fortifications at Columbus, and all day long keep up with them an artillery duel. We could distinctly hear the cannon's peal at our camp, some twenty miles away, and our boys, listening to its ominous note, would remark, "Hark! from the tomb a doleful sound."

These occurrences had become common by long repetition and a spirit of unrest prevailed in the camp. The soldiers, burning with a valor as yet untried, impatiently bewailed the situation, and indulged in wild and vigorous criticisms of the conduct of the war, foolishly threatening to desert if something were not soon done to bring on the issue! These were but the vaporings of ignorant amateurs in the science of war.

Once in a while a rebel dispatch-boat, flying a flag of truce, would round the bend with bow pointed toward Cairo. Immediately a "Long Tom" on the fortifications of Cairo would belch a command to halt; sending a cannon-ball ricocheting on the water across the bow of the intruder. Then all the idle soldiers in the three camps would scamper to the banks of the river, and line up in wild expectancy. Out from Cairo's wharf would dart a small tub, also bearing a flag of truce, proceeding to where the rebel boat waited, its uneasy wheels keeping up sufficient motion to prevent a backward drift down stream. An interview, lasting from fifteen minutes to perhaps an hour, would take place, and possibly the little tug would steam back to impart information to General Grant or to obtain additional authority to enable it to deal with the question at issue; retracing its way to the waiting flag of truce, where another parley would ensue, after which the two would separate, each returning to its respective place of duty. In the minds of our boys, watching the dumb-play from the banks, many speculative theories would evolve, relating to the probable significance and possible results of the conference; but, needless to relate, we remained unenlightened.

Having thus outlined the situation, with its monotony

and its small excitements, previous to the date of November 6th, with which this paper starts, I will proceed with the events connected with the Battle of Belmont, which was the first wedge driven by Gen. Grant in the great internecine strife of our nation.

On the day mentioned an order was sent by General Grant for certain of the regiments at Bird's Point to prepare all men not on guard duty or otherwise engaged for action; each man to be equipped with a certain number of rounds of ammunition and one day's cooked rations. All were to be in readiness to board certain steamboats, which were to be sent for them.

Those receiving the orders to move commenced packing without delay. Knapsacks were made ready amid loud huzzas and many sounds of joy, for at last the long weariness of camp life was to be broken, and war, actual war, participated in. Everything was in readiness when, in the middle of the afternoon, the *Belle Memphis* and two other steamers arrived at the camp. All were large boats, but the names of the others and of the two or three additional ones loaded at Cairo, have escaped my memory. My regiment was the 22d Illinois Volunteer Infantry.

One company of cavalry, also one section of light artillery, boarded the *Belle Memphis*; the 27th Illinois, with the 7th Iowa Volunteer Infantry, went aboard the other boats. We proceeded over to Cairo at sundown. The boats there had been likewise loaded with troops, among them being Col. John A. Logan with his regiment. My memory is in default as to the names of other regiments in the flotilla.

Gen. Grant made our boat, the *Belle Memphis*, his flagship. The Fort Holt soldiers were not taken aboard the steamers, but had orders to march that night a certain distance toward Columbus.

As soon as night settled down, the flotilla, with two gunboats, started down the river. Up to that time we had not known whether we were going up the Ohio, or up or down the Mississippi. I think about twelve miles were covered

before we tied up for the night at the site of old Fort Jefferson on the Kentucky side. My impression is that it was at that point that the Fort Holt troops bivouacked for the night.

Well do I remember that night! The animated scene on the boat, where the boys were jubilant at the thought that we were going, as was supposed, to attack Columbus. I mingled with my company on the upper deck, directing them how to bivouack on the same in as good order as possible—sleep upon their arms, as it were, to be ready for any emergency. Upon going down into the cabin after attending to these matters, I found the officers of the command separated into various assemblages engaged in discussing the mission upon which we were bent, all being of the opinion that its object was the capture of Columbus. One small party, sitting around a table in the ladies' cabin, was notable, as seen in the light of events which had not then happened. It consisted of General Grant and some of his staff. An orderly stood at the dividing line which separated the ladies' cabin from the main or gentlemen's cabin. The picture was an interesting one. The glittering chandeliers cast their beams upon the man who, little suspected, was to be the hero of the war; destined to command the armies of this great nation, win more battles than all the other commanders, and become the most noted warrior of the nineteenth century; destined also to become president of our country for eight years, thus rounding out a remarkable career among the rulers of the world.

Finally the assemblage melted away, each officer lying himself to his couch to snatch a brief repose before the expected hour when grim Death, in most tempestuous mood, would come stalking among the armies of the blue and the gray.

It was felt by all that a crucial test was near, and while cheerfulness reigned with officers and men, it was yet felt that sorrow lurked near, and there was yearning for the loved ones at home who would perhaps on the morrow be

left desolate. None could divine the will of Providence, nor could any claim exemption from its decrees.

Just as the faint streaks of dawn ushered in the day of November 7th we were aroused and the several boats began to move cautiously and slowly down the river, preceded by the gunboats. We all ate our breakfast from the one day's cooked rations in our haversacks. When within five or six miles of Columbus, the sun was rising, and the rebels, having caught sight of our smoke, began cannonading over the woodland in our direction. We were made to land on the Missouri side and our gunboats dropped down in sight of the rebel batteries and commenced hostilities. Our supposition was that we had only been landed where we were until, at the proper time, we should be taken to the Kentucky side to storm the rebel heights. But finally our orders came to march ashore. The command was drawn up in line on the river bank at the edge of a corn-field. Here we remained while General Grant made a disposition of troops to guard the steamboats.

I might here say that the command leaving Cairo was 2,850 men. There were regiments enough to indicate a much larger force, but it must be remembered that the order calling for them did not interfere with those who were on guard duty or other service in camp; hence, the men ready for immediate marching orders did not comprise all of the men who were able for duty. Here a regiment would have, say 300, another 400; and the largest number was 500, which was the 22d Illinois—350 of the men of the command comprised the number which was left behind on the duty of guarding the boats: therefore we had 2,500 men to take into the fight.

The delay incident to making the disposition of the boat guard in a strategic position, to secure the best service in case the boats were attacked, brought the hour of the day to about 7:30 a. m. During the time we were awaiting final orders, the gunboats had dropped further down to within sight of the Columbus fortifications and were passing the

time in active hostilities with the rebel batteries. Occasionally the rebels tried to find our steamboats with their 128-pound shells, all of which passed over us, causing a general ducking of heads. Those larger shells would bury themselves in the ground some 300 or 400 yards beyond our right. I remember one that entered the river bank whose face at that time was, say, 25 or 30 feet above the water level, and the last of it I saw just before marching, when some three or four deck-hands of our boat were digging it out with shovels. I saw the same shell in Cairo the following day. These large shells were defective and did not explode.

After the disposal of the men was completed to the satisfaction of General Grant, he came riding up the river road to our regiment, which was on the extreme right. Our colonel, Dougherty, had been assigned by him to command a brigade, thus leaving us under the command of our lieutenant-colonel, Hart. Hart was sitting on his horse about ten paces from where I was standing in line with my company. The General addressed him: "Colonel, advance your company of skirmishers." I had perfected my company in the skirmish drill and was the only captain who had paid any attention to it. Colonel Hart, glancing at me, nodded his head and said, "Captain, advance your company as skirmishers." I saluted and said, "Colonel, shall I deploy by section, platoon or company?" The General immediately said, "Colonel, give the Captain another company for reserve," and at once addressed me, "Deploy your whole company, Captain, to develop the line of the enemy." I saluted and at once gave my company order to form in four ranks, and file left, which took us through the corn-field and into the woods, followed by Company C, which the Colonel gave me for reserve.

At first entering the woods I found their border composed of large forest trees and clear of underbush, but possibly 300 yards distant I saw a thick tanglewood that had the appearance of a cane-brake, or a close growth of willows similar to what one sees on bottom lands or islands of a

river. It appeared to be an impenetrable mass, of which my vision could see no end in either direction so far as was discernible through the woods. After marching probably about 1000 feet into this wood, I brought both companies in line of battle and addressed them thus: "Boys, we are entering this morning what will prove a pitched battle. Many of us have seen the sun rise for the last time and will not see it set. I wish to remind you of the fact that Illinois troops became famous in the war with Mexico, and that to-day the eyes of Illinois are upon us and we must not shrink from our duty to uphold her honor and preserve the escutcheon unsullied. We have most of us during the past few months participated in small skirmishing, heard the whistle of lead and smelled a little powder, but none of us have experienced a battle. I do not know what the crucial test may cause, but I want you to mark what I say—if I should show the white feather, shoot me dead in my tracks and my family will feel that I died for my country. Boys, it is now quite warm and we are going to have a hot day; I propose that all of us take off our coats, pile them at the foot of this tree, and I will leave John Baker, who is lame, with them; when we come back to the boats we can get them, and if we don't come back we may not want them again." I stacked arms for a minute and each of us did what I had recommended and we all rolled up our sleeves; I gave the necessary commands, my company was deployed on the double quick and we commenced the march in skirmish line. Only a few minutes, and I saw three of my men fall, one whom was dead. We entered that labyrinth of wild wood and held and drove by fits and starts, and finally the battle was on. The rattle of the volleys of musketry was terrific and even grand resounding through the woods. At length I rallied my two companies in close order, and, working our way through to a more open woodland, attempted to find my regiment. It had been ordered to the right somewhere, I was told by one of the hospital corps whom I met with a wounded man. We were marching along by the flank, and coming behind the

7th Iowa, which was stubbornly fighting, I, all of a sudden, saw them swing back like the opening of a double gate and the rebels were wildly charging upon them. The 7th Iowa Regiment was badly cut to pieces in this charge of the enemy. My companies happening to be opposite this opening gap, I brought them left face in line of battle, thus filling the gap, and made a counter-charge on the rebels, who in turn broke away. The 7th Iowa rallied and joined my command and remained with us until we had captured the rebel camp, which was then the noon hour. It appeared that in our march across the bend we had about three miles to go to get to their camp. Upon the alarm being given them early in the morning, they had rushed from their camp while the cooks were preparing breakfast. For several hours afterwards their frying pans, with meat and other preparations for breakfast, were found where they had been suddenly abandoned, and there is no doubt in my mind but the men were rushed to the front without any sustenance whatever.

The rebel camp was surrounded by some earthworks, reinforced by abatis of considerable strength; inside their works were several pieces of light artillery, brass guns, six-pounders, having an inscription cast on the breech, which proclaimed the command to be what had been known in previous years as the crack New Orleans battery of flying artillery. The rebel troops were marched out probably two and a half miles from their camp to confront us; therefore from the time battle opened they opposed us step by step, causing us to take four hours to press them to the margin of their camp. On reaching their camp, their New Orleans battery, which had not been engaged before, began to play. Our forces finally made breaches through into their camp, charged upon and captured their cannon. The gunners fled with the infantry in great confusion, while their speed was accelerated by the loads they had just put into their guns and left, to be fired at them by our men.

The regimental band of ours had been detailed early in the morning to serve the hospital corps, and they were busy

during the battle bearing off the wounded to the field hospital. Greatly to our surprise, we discovered in our moment of victory that in some inexplicable manner the members of our band had succeeded in keeping their instruments with them; for there, on the bank of the river, in defiance of the large body of the enemy in plain view on the other side of the river, they surrounded our colors and began playing "Dixie," passed from it to the "Star-Spangled Banner," then to "Yankee Doodle," followed by other soul-stirring patriotic airs. It is impossible for me to portray that scene. The exuberance of spirit was boundless. The Union soldiers cavorted and huzzaed, while rounding up a goodly number of prisoners; their antics were inspiring and thrilling. I myself mounted a captured gun, and had the boys join with song in the performance of the band. I remember that the inspiration of those moments infused me with a willingness to join the angels and march on to glory right then and there.

As I said before, the banks of the Mississippi were high above the water and under the shelter of these the rebels retreated below our vision. We had at this time probably a thousand prisoners, and had full possession of their camp. Many of the tents were standing and a number of piles of tents were rolled up, lying on the ground ready for wagons, and we afterwards learned that 5,000 rebels were expected to start that day to corral Colonel Dick Oglesby, who was somewhere near Rolla with three regiments.

In the jollification over the victory the boys began looting the tents and found many trinkets of value in the officers' baggage. They set fire to most of the tents. While this was going on, there across the river, which is very narrow at Columbus, Kentucky, could be seen many thousands of rebel troops in line of battle on the hills close up against the river. Some of their cannons kept up a shower of shells upon us, mostly going wild and hurting some only. About 1 o'clock a steamboat was seen coming up the river from some point below. In turning the bend as it hove in sight it was

seen to be crowded with troops. We allowed it to come nearer and nearer, when at the proper time we turned one of the New Orleans guns upon her. The first shot hit the water and went wild, but the second entered the front of the cabin and passed through lengthwise and out into the water. We were afterward informed that dinner was being served; that the ball cleared the table, killing and wounding several. Instantly the boat commenced backing, finally succeeding in turning around, and traveled away back around the bend. Our losses had been heavy through the day thus far. We had met the "New Orleans Tigers," the "Texas Rangers," and much of the boastful spirit of the South, which at that time maintained that "one Southerner could whip five Yankees." I asked, on the field, a rebel orderly sergeant about that saying, and he replied, "Oh, we don't mean you Westerners. We thought this morning, when you were approaching, that we never saw such big men in our lives before. You looked like *giants*!" The rebel authorities had not been idle during the time we spent at their camp. Out of the view of our gunboats, two of their steamers were at work a mile or so above us, busily transferring a number of rebel soldiers from Columbus camps to our side of the river, with a view of cutting us off. It was always asserted that eleven regiments were crossed over, but as to the number, I do not know.

When General Grand ordered a retreat to our boats, we had another battle to go through two lines of troops between us and them. It was then possibly 2 o'clock, maybe later, and when those of our command who did get through reached the river, the sun was setting. When we reached the boats, I was with four or five others at the water's edge, near the gang-plank of our boat, when a man at the top of the bank halloed, "Get aboard the boat; they are coming!" He called out to the captain of the boat, "Chop your lines and back out." We looked up and saw it was General Grant. We ran across the gang-plank and immediately behind us was the General and his horse. The boat was backing out as the

rebels came to the bank of the river shooting volleys at us, and at the pilot of the vessel. Providence guarded the pilot. He was not hit, though a number of soldiers were. A gunboat was in the channel about 100 feet from us. Its captain called out and motioned to the men on the lower deck at the bow to lie down, which they did; and the gunboat sent a broadside at the rebels that mowed them down. The angle from the guns of the gunboat to the top of the bank at the distance we maintained from shore brought the heads of our men in line; hence the captain was frantic to get our men down.

The remnants of nearly all the regiments had got abroad their respective crafts, except the 27th Illinois Infantry. Its colonel, Buford, seeing he could not make it, made a detour into the interior around the rebels. We proceeded slowly up the river and finally the fleet was hailed by the 27th several miles up and they were taken aboard their boat. Our trip up the river was a solemn one. Many wounded men were lying on the cabin floor and on the guards; those who were known to be dead on the field were tenderly spoken of, and those whom no one could account for were hoped for. Finally, supper was served. General Grant sat at the end of the table next to the ladies' cabin. I occupied a seat the fourth from his on the left. All the officers were discoursing on the events of the day very glibly, but the General said not a word further than to speak to the waiter. We thought he was hard-hearted, cold and indifferent, but it was only the difference between a *real* soldier and amateur soldiers. Thus ended the Battle of Belmont. We knew not then what we went there for, but the General knew, and he saved Oglesby's command and tested the mettle of the untried soldiers. Besides, the rebels never held a camp there afterwards or anywhere on that side of the river north of New Madrid.

I will here quote from the "Memoirs" of U. S. Grant: "Our loss at Belmont was 485 in killed, wounded, and missing. About 125 of our wounded fell into the hands of the

enemy. We returned with 175 prisoners and two guns, and spiked four others." Pardon me for digressing here, but I wish to say to you, companions, I brought off one of these two guns. It was the one I had used in firing at the steamboat.

Again quoting the "Memoirs" of Grant: "The enemy had about 7,000; but this includes the troops over from Columbus who were not engaged in the first defence of Belmont. The two objects for which the Battle of Belmont was fought were fully accomplished. The enemy gave up all idea of detaching troops from Columbus. His losses were very heavy for that period of the war. Columbus was beset by people looking for their wounded or dead kin. I learned later, when I had moved farther south, that Belmont had caused more mourning than almost any other battle up to that time. The national troops acquired a confidence in themselves at Belmont that did not desert them through the war."

Before closing, I think it proper for the purpose of this paper to quote from Jefferson Davis' "The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government," as follows: "On the 6th of November, General Grant left his headquarters at Cairo with a land and naval force and encamped on the Kentucky shore. This act and a demonstration made by detachments from the force at Paducah were probably intended to induce the belief that he contemplated an attack on Columbus, thus concealing his real purpose to surprise the small garrison at Belmont. General Polk, on the morning of the 7th, discovered the landing of the Federal forces on the Missouri shore, some seven miles above Columbus, and, divining the real purpose of the enemy, detached General Pillow with four regiments of his division, say 2,000 men, to reinforce the garrison at Belmont. Very soon after his arrival the enemy commenced an assault, which was sternly resisted, and with varying fortune for several hours. The enemy's front so far exceeded the length of our line as to enable him to attack on both flanks, and our troops were finally driven back to the bank of the river

with the loss of their battery. The enemy advanced to the bank of the river below the point to which our men had retreated, and opened an artillery fire upon the town of Columbus, to which our guns from the commanding height responded, with such effect as to drive him from the river-bank. In the meantime General Polk had at intervals sent three regiments to reinforce General Pillow. Upon the arrival of the first of these, General Pillow led it to a favorable position, where it for sometime steadily resisted and checked the advance of the enemy. General Pillow, with great energy and gallantry, rallied his repulsed troops and brought them again into action. General Polk now proceeded in person with two other regiments. Whether from this or some other cause, the enemy commenced a retreat. General Pillow, whose activity and daring on the occasion were worthy of all praise, led the first and second detachments by which he had been reinforced to attack the enemy in the rear, and General Polk, landing further up the river, moved to cut off the enemy's retreat; but some embarrassment and consequent delay which occurred in landing his troops caused him to be too late for the purpose for which he crossed, and to become only a part of the pursuing force. One would naturally suppose that the question about which there would be the greatest certainty would be the number of troops engaged in a battle, yet there is nothing in regard to which we have such conflicting accounts. It is fairly concluded, from the current reports, that the enemy attacked us on both flanks, and that in the beginning of the action we were outnumbered; but the obstinacy with which the conflict was maintained and the successive advances and retreats which occurred in the action indicate that the disparity could not have been very great, and therefore that, after the arrival of our reinforcements, our troops must have become numerically superior. The dead and wounded left upon the field, the arms, ammunition, and military stores abandoned in his flight, so incontestably prove his defeat, that his claim to have achieved a victory is too

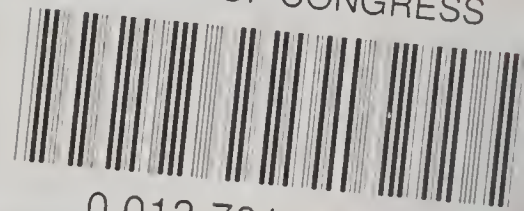
preposterous for discussion. Though the forces engaged were comparatively small to those in subsequent battles of the war, six hours of incessant combat, with repeated bayonet charges, must place this in the rank of the most stubborn engagements, and the victors must accord to the vanquished the meed of having fought like Americans. Our loss in killed, wounded and missing was six hundred and forty-one; that of the enemy was probably not less than twelve hundred."

Before closing, I will say we did not come back to the same tree, so did not recover our coats we discarded in the morning. My own was a new one that I had bought in Cairo a few days before. Our guns were of those known as the Harper's Ferry flint-lock musket, altered to percussion caps, and the ammunition being cartridges that must be torn open with one's teeth, inserted in the muzzle of the musket and rammed home. The cartridge contained with the powder one lead ball and four buckshot. With cartridge-biting, the faces of the men soon looked as though they might be coal-miners.

The impressions of the Battle of Belmont are still clear and vivid within my mind after the lapse of many years devoted to peaceful pursuits. Whatever its place in history, a young man's first battle must be to him the greatest event of his life, and as such have I remembered the battle I have attempted to describe—the Battle of Belmont.

I have framed and hung on the walls of my residence at Atchison, "Special Orders" from General Grant, of date December 21, 1861, read on dress parade, complimenting me for "the valuable services rendered at the Battle of Belmont" by me. I intended to bring the same here to show you to-night, but forgot it.

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